



September 1, 2024

Announcing DEAC's Revised Accreditation Standards

The Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) has successfully completed its systematic program of review of its accreditation standards; a process it initiated in April 2023. After thoroughly evaluating recommendations from the Standards Committee and all submitted comments, the Commission implemented minor technical adjustments and conforming amendments to enhance the standards. This process of review underscores DEAC's commitment to maintaining high educational quality and adapting to the evolving needs of its institutions, students, graduates, and other stakeholders. The updated Accreditation Standards will take effect on January 1, 2025, however the DEAC is making them available to the public on September 1, 2024. This advance release allows institutions sufficient time to review the standards and plan for implementation.

Overview of the Systematic Program of Review

To kickstart the process, DEAC held focus group sessions at its 2023 Annual Conference and distributed surveys to various stakeholders, including students, alumni, employers, faculty, staff, and members of the regulatory community. By engaging with a diverse range of perspectives, DEAC sought to gather valuable insights and feedback on the existing accreditation standards, paving the way for informed discussions and review by the Standards Committee.

The data collected from these engagement activities served as a crucial foundation for the development of the newly reorganized and revised standards of accreditation. Through a rigorous review process, DEAC examined the existing standards to determine their validity and reliability as indicators of educational quality in distance learning. Retaining standards that proved effective and introducing new requirements to address emerging trends were key outcomes of this comprehensive process of review.

Furthermore, to enhance clarity and usability, DEAC restructured the standards from twelve areas of focus to fifteen. This reformatting was aimed at rearranging each standard and improving the overall flow and organization of the document, making it more streamlined and user-friendly for institutions, evaluators, and external stakeholders.

The Commission recognizes and appreciates the dedicated efforts of Dr. Ray Rodriguez and the Standards Committee in developing the new accreditation standards where needed and in retaining existing content where appropriate.

In summary, DEAC's thorough review of its standards of accreditation underscores its commitment to quality assurance, continuous improvement, and alignment with best practices in distance education. By engaging all of its stakeholders in the review process, and by making revisions that reflect current trends, DEAC aims to uphold its mission of promoting excellence and ensuring the quality of distance education programs under its accreditation purview.

Summary of the Commission's Review of Comments on the Fifteen Standards

Over the past 18 months, the Commission and Standards Committee have thoroughly reviewed and refined multiple drafts of the accreditation standards. The summary below outlines the final stage of the systematic review process prior to implementation. During this phase, the Commission evaluated public comments received on the latest version of the proposed standards and made final revisions based on the insightful feedback from commenters. For further details about the complete review process, please reach out to DEAC Staff.

Standard I: Mission

DEAC's accreditation and evaluation processes place a strong emphasis on the significance of an institution's mission, recognizing its essential role in providing a clear sense of direction and identity within the distance education community. The mission serves as the foundation upon which an institution builds its strategies, policies, and overall approach to education, helping to articulate its unique values and objectives.

The Commission received a variety of comments and questions related to this standard. Many stakeholders underscored the importance of an institution's overall mission as a guiding framework for decision-making, strategic planning, and organizational behavior. A well-defined mission empowers faculty, staff, and students to align their efforts toward shared goals, fostering a cohesive environment that promotes educational excellence and institutional integrity.

Considering the feedback received, the Commission removed the word "statement" from the standard. This adjustment reflects a broader understanding of how missions can be communicated and embodied beyond a formal declaration, allowing institutions greater flexibility in how they articulate their missions.

Additionally, some comments suggested that the Commission should provide a clearer definition of the term "regular basis." However, after careful consideration, the Commission concluded that the interpretation of this phrase is best left to the discretion of each institution and its governance body. This approach recognizes the diversity of institutions within the distance education landscape and allows them to determine what "regular basis" means in the context of their unique operational frameworks and mission-related activities. By doing so, DEAC supports institutions in maintaining their autonomy while still upholding the principles of accountability and quality assurance.

Standard II: Governance

Relocated from Standard X, this requirement maintains the same three core components while integrating state authorization from the current Standard XII as a critical criterion for ongoing accreditation eligibility. The Commission reviewed comments concerning the requirement for annual reviews and revisions of succession plans. In response to the feedback, the Commission agreed that the phrase "and revises" should be removed from the standard as revisions are only required upon determination of need. Overall, the feedback indicated support for this standard, underscoring its significance in ensuring quality and accountability within the accreditation process.

Standard III: Institutional Planning and Effectiveness

Standard III focuses on the effectiveness of achieving the mission, which is currently outlined in Standard I, and upholds the requirements for assessing institutional effectiveness and strategic planning. In response to the comments received, the Commission completely revised the introductory statement to

better reflect stakeholder feedback. Additionally, there was strong support for replacing the term “key indicators” with “clearly defined metrics and criteria.”

Moreover, the comments highlighted a desire for additional resource materials, professional development opportunities, and other activities to enhance capacity in institutional effectiveness assessment and strategic planning. In response to this interest, the Commission is committed to developing and providing these valuable resources at its events, both online and in person, to support institutions in their efforts to improve and excel in these critical areas.

Standard IV: Academic Achievement

Relocated from the current requirements under Standard V, this standard retains its core components while significantly enhancing the context surrounding both direct and indirect measures of assessment. As part of this update, performance disclosures have been moved to Standard XIII.E. The Commission engaged in a thorough review of the comments received which expressed support for revisions that resulted in less proscriptive language and that provide institutions with greater flexibility in developing and implementing student learning outcomes. The new language allows institutions to tailor their approaches to better meet the unique needs of their students and educational environments.

Many of the comments provided insightful perspectives on how outcomes assessment is operationalized within various institutions. Stakeholders shared their experiences and best practices, which highlighted the importance of adaptability in assessment strategies. The Commission values this feedback as it fosters a deeper understanding of the diverse ways institutions can effectively measure student learning and success.

Furthermore, the Commission carefully reviewed extensive commentary specifically related to Standard IV.C: Student Satisfaction/Indirect Measures. This commentary offered perspectives of “employer opinions” as a foundational basis for evaluating and improving institution curricula, instructional materials, methods of delivery, and student services. Recognizing the importance of this feedback, the Commission also considered recommendations from the Standards Committee.

In response to the feedback, the language was revised to state that "the institution systematically seeks input from students, alumni, and the employment community to evaluate and improve curricula, instructional materials, methods of delivery, and student services." This change emphasizes a more inclusive approach to gathering feedback, recognizing that insights from various stakeholders, including employers, are crucial for a holistic evaluation of an institution's effectiveness.

The Commission firmly believes that contributions from employers play an integral role in assessing an institution's ongoing effectiveness and its ability to achieve its mission. By incorporating employer feedback into the evaluation process, institutions can enhance their educational offerings, ensuring they remain relevant and responsive to the needs of the labor market.

Standard V: Academic Program Requirements

The current Standard III has undergone significant revisions and has been redistributed into more precise areas of focus, more than any other standard. Standard V specifically addresses the academic aspects of program delivery, alternative program structures, and the role of program advisory councils. While many comments aimed to address the unique circumstances of institutions with highly specialized program offerings, the Commission decided not to implement changes to Standard V.A.

The Commission is intentionally fostering innovation and flexibility concerning general education requirements for undergraduate programs (V.B). New approaches to general education emerged as a prominent topic during the focus group discussions in the systematic program review, as well as through surveys conducted with academic personnel. After carefully evaluating the feedback received, the Commission recognizes that institutions may choose to offer individual general education courses to fulfill this requirement. Additionally, the standard encourages the exploration of new approaches to general education, allowing institutions to adapt and enhance their curricula in ways that best serve their students' needs.

The Commission appreciates support for its new standard V.C for alternative program structures.

Standard VI: Curriculum Development

This standard, which has been derived from the content currently situated under Standard III, places a strong emphasis on instructional design while ensuring that existing requirements for academic units of measurement and the definition of credit hours are maintained. The Commission carefully considered several comments expressing concern that the proposed requirement for an “annual review of program curricula” could prove to be overly burdensome and time-consuming for institutions’ academic departments.

In light of this feedback, the Commission engaged in a thorough review of the commentary and insights provided by the Standards Committee. They recognized the importance of balancing the need for regular curriculum evaluation with the practical realities faced by academic institutions. As a result, the Commission made a revision to the language, stating that “Program curricula are reviewed on a periodic basis by academic leadership, program leadership, program faculty, and the Program Advisory Council.” This change aims to create a more manageable process for curriculum review while still ensuring that programs remain relevant and effective in meeting educational standards and student needs.

Standard VII: Learning Materials and Resources

This language is derived from the requirements currently outlined in Standard III.G and introduces a crucial component for the evaluation, review, and revision of library resources. In response to feedback regarding the provisions in Standard VII.A, the Commission has decided to relocate the statement “A process is in place to select, acquire, organize, and maintain institutional learning materials and resources for each program” from Standard VII.A to VII.C.

Additionally, the Commission carefully considered comments concerning the need for an “annual review” of the quality, adequacy, currency, and accuracy of institutional learning resources, technologies, library resources, and in-course learning materials for each program. After thorough deliberation, the Commission chose not to amend this requirement, affirming that an annual review aligns with best practices aimed at ensuring educational quality and the achievement of desired outcomes. This commitment to regular evaluation underscores the importance of maintaining high standards in educational resources and supports continuous improvement across programs.

Standard VIII: Academic Delivery

This new standard emphasizes the importance of distance learning modalities, and the supporting academic technologies associated with them. In response to feedback gathered during the comment and review process, the Commission made a revision to Standard VIII.B, changing the first sentence to read:

"The institution uses technology appropriate to its modality and institutional context to support the delivery of its educational programs."

The Commission believes this revision effectively addresses concerns raised by stakeholders regarding the wide variety and diversity among DEAC accredited institutions, as well as the differing models of instructional delivery and student learning. By clarifying the role of technology in relation to diverse educational contexts, this change aims to ensure that institutions can tailor their technological approaches to best meet the needs of their unique student populations and institution mission.

Standard IX: Academic Leadership and Staffing

This standard is derived from the existing language found in Standard VI and maintains many of the current requirements, including those related to faculty qualification equivalency. The Commission recognizes and appreciates the valuable comments and feedback submitted regarding this standard, as they reflect the ongoing commitment to enhancing educational quality and faculty standards.

After careful consideration, however, the Commission has decided not to implement any additional changes to the standards for faculty qualification. This decision is based on a thorough review of the feedback and an assessment of the current framework, which the Commission believes adequately addresses the necessary qualifications for faculty. The Commission remains dedicated to monitoring this area and will continue to evaluate the standard considering future developments and ongoing input from stakeholders.

Standard X: Academic Policies

This standard includes content from current Standards III and VIII. The Commission appreciates the comments in support of the changes. The Commission implemented a proposed revision for X.D to revise the last sentence to read "the institution implements procedures to ensure that assessments will reflect a student's own knowledge and competence in accordance with stated learning outcomes."

Standard XI: Recruitment and Enrollment

This standard incorporates key elements from Standard VII while establishing a clear distinction between scholarships and tuition discounts. By delineating these two approaches to financial support programs, the standard aims to enhance transparency for students, institutions, and stakeholders alike. The Commission appreciates the supportive comments received regarding this clarification, as they underscore the importance of distinguishing between scholarships, which are typically based on merit or need, and tuition discounts, which may be used as promotional tools.

In response to the feedback, the Commission implemented one recommended change: the removal of the word "academic" from the first sentence of Standard XI.F. This adjustment reflects a broader understanding of the types of scholarships available and ensures that the language aligns more closely with the diverse funding options institutions may offer.

Standard XII: Student Support Services

A portion of this content is drawn from current Standard IV, educational and student support services. The Commission appreciates the comments it received; however, it did not make any changes.

Standard XIII: Fair Practices

This new standard category emphasizes transparency, fairness, and confidentiality. DEAC will retain the same requirements for processing student complaints, while advertising requirements have been streamlined for clarity and efficiency.

In instances where a state or government-mandated refund policy is not in place, institutions are required to implement DEAC's refund policy. Details regarding term-based and flexible time-based refund policies, which serve as alternatives to state refund policies, have been relocated to the DEAC Appendices in Part Four of the Accreditation Handbook. The Commission noted the comments about the availability of this language during the comment period. There is a hyperlink to Appendix XIV that is included in the standards document that will be in place through January 1, 2024. The language in Appendix XIV is copied from the refund policy language that is currently in place under Standard IX.C. Please note that the Commission did not make any changes to the refund policy language that has been relocated to Appendix XIV.

This relocation of the refund policy to the Appendix aims to streamline the standards while ensuring that essential information remains readily available for institutions and stakeholders.

Standard XIV: Finance

This standard retains the majority of the content currently included in Standard XI, which addresses Financial Responsibility. One of the most significant changes introduced is the new requirement mandating that all accredited institutions submit audited financial statements, at least annually.

The Commission received a range of feedback regarding this change, with some comments expressing support for the requirement, highlighting its importance in ensuring that institutions maintain sound financial practices. Conversely, some comments raised concerns about the potential burden this requirement may impose on institutions, particularly smaller ones with limited resources.

Despite the differing viewpoints, the Commission firmly believes that the submission of audited financial statements serves as a crucial benchmark for all accredited institutions. Audited financial statements provide reliable evidence of an institution's financial sustainability and stability, which are essential for maintaining the trust of students, faculty, and stakeholders. By requiring audited financial statements, the Commission promotes financial integrity that supports the long-term success of educational institutions and enhances the value of their accreditation.

Moving forward, the Commission is committed to providing guidance and resources to assist institutions in meeting this requirement, ensuring that they are well-equipped to navigate the auditing process and uphold the highest standards of financial responsibility.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The Commission has established a special implementation timeframe for the submission of audited financial statements and compliance with Standard XIV.A: For institutions with fiscal years ending between January 1, 2025, and June 30, 2025, audited financial statements are due by December 31, 2025. For institutions with fiscal years ending between July 1, 2025, and December 31, 2025, audited financial statements are due by June 30, 2026. In both cases, the Commission is waiving the requirement for comparable statements and accepting audits of one fiscal year. Future submissions of audited statements must be prepared on a comparable basis.

Standard XV: Facilities and Record Maintenance

This standard, derived from the content currently found in Standard XII, enhances the requirements for protecting virtual infrastructures while clarifying physical facility requirements. The Commission carefully considered the comments submitted regarding Standard X.V.C, which requires a professional, institution-branded space. While some commenters raised concerns that requiring a professional setting might conflict with the principles of distance education, the Commission asserts that institutions that are approved for DEAC accreditation should possess a well-defined physical presence that is commensurate with this status. Ultimately, the Commission believes that an appropriate physical presence complements the mission of distance education, ensuring that accredited institutions uphold the integrity and professionalism associated with DEAC accreditation.